

**UNIMAS ENGLISH LANGUAGE ESL TRAINEE TEACHERS' BELIEFS
ABOUT GRAMMAR AND GRAMMAR TEACHING**

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ABSTRACT

The aim for this research is to investigate UNIMAS English language ESL trainee teachers regarding their beliefs on grammar and the teaching of grammar. This survey is a cross-sectional study with samples drawn from a total of 74 participants, consisting of 42 pre-service and 32 in-service trainee teachers who are pursuing a degree in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The criteria for the selection of the samples are those trainee teachers have completed their teaching practicum in schools, therefore their beliefs and practices in grammar teaching can be studied as they have been put through theory and practice. There are three research objectives formulated from this study: (1) investigate UNIMAS English language trainee teachers' beliefs with regards to grammar and grammar teaching, (2) investigate their grammar teaching practices and (3) identify the influences that shaped their beliefs. There are three instruments used to investigate those beliefs and practices. The first instrument is a questionnaire consisting of eight open-ended belief statements used to indicate the teachers' level of beliefs towards grammar and grammar teaching. The second instrument is semi-structured interview while the third instrument is content analysis of the trainee teachers' lesson plans to examine their grammar teaching practices. The survey research design used for this study begins with distribution of questionnaires, conducting interviews and finally the content analysis of the lesson plans. From the data analysis, the beliefs systems of UNIMAS trainee teachers are closely tied to the overt grammar. There are positive responses in questionnaires, interviews and content analysis that show strong preference towards overt grammar teaching. However, even though the participants do not reject the notion of covert grammar teaching as implied in the questionnaire, this notion is hardly supported in their interviews and in their content analysis of lesson plans. In terms of their grammar teaching practices, the overt grammar instruction is more prevalent. For the influences that may have shaped their beliefs, two factors were inferred. One of the factors is the teachers that taught those trainee teachers in schools, and the other factor is the level of proficiency of the students that they are teaching.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini dibuat adalah untuk menyiasat sistem kepercayaan guru pelatih Bahasa Inggeris UNIMAS mengenai tatabahasa dan pengajaran tatabahasa. Kajian tinjauan ini melibatkan 74 peserta, meliputi 42 pra-perkhidmatan dan 32 dalam perkhidmatan guru-guru pelatih yang menjalani kursus ijazah di Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Kriteria untuk pemilihan sampel-sampel tersebut adalah guru-guru pelatih tersebut telah melengkapkan pengajaran praktikum di sekolah, oleh itu sistem kepercayaan dan amalan dalam pengajaran tatabahasa boleh dikaji setelah melalui teori dan dipraktikkan dalam pengajaran sebenar. Terdapat tiga objektif untuk kajian ini: (1) menyiasat kepercayaan guru pelatih Bahasa Inggeris mengenai tatabahasa dan pengajaran tatabahasa, (2) menyiasat amalan pengajaran tatabahasa mereka dan (3) mengenalpasti pengaruh yang membentuk kepercayaan mereka. Terdapat tiga instrumen yang digunakan bagi menyiasat sistem kepercayaan dan pengamalan tersebut. Kaedah pertama ialah borang soal-selidik yang mengandungi lapan kenyataan yang digunakan untuk menunjukkan tahap kepercayaan guru terhadap tatabahasa dan pengajaran tatabahasa. Instrumen kedua pula ialah temubual separa berstruktur, manakala instrument ketiga ialah analisis kandungan pelan-pelan pengajaran guru-guru pelatih untuk menyiasat amalan pengajaran tatabahasa mereka. Kajian tinjauan yang digunakan untuk kajian ini dimulakan dengan pengedaran borang-borang soal selidik, mengadakan temu bual dan akhirnya analisis kandungan pelan pengajaran. Daripada analisis data, sistem kepercayaan guru-guru pelatih UNIMAS berkait rapat dengan pengajaran tatabahasa “overt”. Terdapat maklumbalas positif dalam borang soal selidik, temubual dan analisis kandungan yang menunjukkan kecenderungan terhadap kaedah pengajaran “overt”. Walaupun begitu, guru-guru pelatih tidak menolak pengajaran tatabahasa “covert” seperti terdapat di dalam soal-selidik, namun pandangan ini hampir tidak disokong semasa temubual dan analisis kandungan. Bagi amalan pengajaran tatabahasa pula, pengajaran tatabahasa “overt” lebih dominan. Untuk pengaruh-pengaruh yang membentuk kepercayaan mereka, dua faktor dikenalpasti. Salah satu faktor ialah guru-guru yang pernah mengajar guru-guru pelatih tersebut semasa di bangku sekolah, dan satu lagi faktor ialah tahap pelajar-pelajar yang mereka ajar.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|--|
| ESL | English as Second Language |
| PKPG | Special Degree Program for Non-graduate Teachers |
| TESL | Teaching English as Second Language |
| UNIMAS | Universiti Malaysia Sarawak |

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter describes the background of the research and the research problem. It goes on to explain the objectives of the study, the significance, operational definitions of terms and the scope of the study. Finally, a review of the chapter is discussed.

1.1 Background of the Research

In the field of educational research, the role of teachers' subject-matter knowledge has long been emphasized as shaping the practices in classrooms instruction. Specifically, in the field of English language teaching, this knowledge of the subject-matter is mainly referred to as the knowledge about the language (Borg, 2001).

Although such knowledge about language is regarded as an important factor in determining classroom practice, there are little empirical insights that investigate the relationship between teacher perceptions of such knowledge and their classroom practices (for example, Woods 1996). Furthermore, the influences of teacher beliefs that shape these perceptions and practices are rarely explored (Borg 2001).

There is a growing interest in the field of English language research on studying how such beliefs can shape the perception and practices in language teaching. These fields of research studies how such beliefs shape the perceptions on grammar teaching along with how it influences the language teacher in approaching grammar instruction (see Borg, 2001; Farrell 1999; Smagorinsky et al., 2007).

1.2 Statement of the problem

The present educational institutions have been spending vast amount of time and resources in order to train potential teachers in teacher education programs. Despite the large amount of training in which the teacher receives, there is a general lack of inquiry which attempts to understand the belief systems in which these teachers operate in when it comes to teaching (Borg 2001, Farrell & Lim 2005). This leads to criticisms and claims that call to address the lack of attention in addressing teachers' beliefs as it would potentially lose out the benefits of exploring the belief system of teachers (Farrell, 1999; Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Alamarza, 1996).

According to Farrell (1999), by studying beliefs, teacher education programs can adapt to match and integrate these beliefs into formal teacher training. This is because, when teachers' beliefs go unacknowledged, there is a tendency for these teachers to resist any change. Therefore the effectiveness of such teacher education programs comes into question as it does not investigate the measure of teachers' beliefs against the teaching constructs in the teacher education programs (Pajares, 1992). When teachers' beliefs go unacknowledged, the impact of any education coursework received in altering existing beliefs would be limited (Borg, 2003). As a result, teachers' beliefs about teaching remained largely unchanged (Johnson, 1994, 1999; Kagan, 1992; McLaughlin, 1991).

Alamarza (1996) also discovered that when trainee teachers interpreted theoretical models they were presented to in the teacher education program, they tend to do so by measuring it against their own informally acquired beliefs. The result is that certain trainee teachers tend to reject the methods used in their teacher education program as it conflicted with their own beliefs about teaching. Therefore, it is essential that any educational programs take prior beliefs into account because any new material taught would have to compete with the “folk theories” that already guide the trainee teachers (Joram & Gabriele, 1998).

With regards to grammar teaching in English language teaching, several studies have been conducted on studying the belief system of teachers on grammar teaching and how it is reflected in their instructional practices. Various methodologies have been employed for this purpose, the examples are case study (Borg, 2001; Smagorinsky, et al, 2007), content analysis (Farrell, 1999), interviews (Borg, 1999), and questionnaires (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Peacock 2001). Nevertheless, these studies have its share of criticism such when case studies often lack statistical data to check its reliability whilst in others, the absence of more detailed qualitative data prevented further insights into how the individuals arrive at their current state (Borg, 2003). Since those studies used different quantitative or qualitative approaches, differences in methodologies resulted in a gap or a missed opportunity for a thorough study in which a combination of quantitative and qualitative data is needed to cross validate the information gathered in analyzing teachers’ beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching. Furthermore, in second language setting such as in Malaysia, studies that investigate the beliefs of teacher trainees in language teacher education programs are largely limited. Johnson (1994) even claims that the field of Second Language teacher education lags behind of those in mainstream educational research. Therefore, there is a need for more research that requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative data that is necessary for cross

checking the reliability of the information in analyzing the teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching.

With these in mind, the purpose of this study is to investigate UNIMAS trainee teachers' beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching, and determine how their beliefs shape the ways in which they devise instructional practices during the teaching practicum.

1.3 Research objectives

The purpose of this study is to conduct a survey on undergraduate teachers' beliefs about grammar teaching and to evaluate how these beliefs shape the way they conceptualize their instructional practices of grammar during their teaching practicum.

Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

- 1) To investigate the trainee teachers' beliefs with regard to grammar and grammar teaching
- 2) To investigate trainee teachers' classroom practices in teaching grammar
- 3) To identify the influences that shape the beliefs of trainee teachers regarding grammar teaching

1.4 Research questions

The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the underlying beliefs of grammar and grammar teaching of trainee teachers in UNIMAS?

2. What are the trainee teachers' classroom practices in relation to their beliefs about grammar teaching?
3. What are the influences that shaped the teacher trainees' beliefs on grammar and grammar teaching?

1.5 Significance of the study

The studies and issues inherent in grammar and grammar teaching have always been a complicated and complex field for the past decades. Borg (1999) and Larsen-Freeman (2006) describe grammar as one of the most ill-defined domain in English language teaching. Studies for more than 20 years have failed to yield any firm guidelines for grammar teaching methodology (see Ellis 1994, 1998), and the role of formal instruction of grammar have often been left in doubt. However, a study on teachers' beliefs about grammar and grammar teaching is significant and relevant as it can make sense of the uncertainties that surround grammar.

Even though there have been publications on the significance of teachers' beliefs on grammar and grammar teaching, the focus has often remained outside the scope of pedagogical significance. It had to be noted that very much of these studies either lack further empirical insights (see Borg 2001; Farrell 1999; Pajares, 1992; Smagorinsky, et al 2007) or differences in methodology has made it questionable to make comparisons between those studies (Borg, 2003).

Furthermore, there should be a need for more localized studies, in particular second language context (Johnson, 1994; Farrell & Lim, 2005), as very much of the research stays in mainstream education rather in second language settings. Furthermore, another issue is that the settings of the research problems. Studies of this type have mainly been conducted in the context of Western ESL settings or EFL setting and do not take account where the teacher received their teacher education

(e.g. whether in an ESL, EFL or native speaker environment; see Borg, 2003). With that in mind, the participants of this study was selected in a more local setting, a second language setting, that is to focus on trainee teachers of UNIMAS, who have recently completed their teaching practicum as well as completed courses in teaching grammar. These include the TESL Year 4 students and ESL Year 3 students.

Moreover, regarding the participants of these studies, often, recent publications (for example, Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Farrell & Lim, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2001; Richards, Gallo & Renandya, 2001) have selected experienced in-service teachers to participate in the research rather than novice teachers or pre-service teachers. These participants are in-service teachers who have years of teaching experiences. Furthermore, these teachers are Western trained teachers, meaning that they receive teacher training education in native speaker countries that communicates in English as a first language. The implication here is that these studies are often localized in Western settings.

A way to begin to address these issues is to analyze the local trainee teachers' own beliefs regarding grammar and grammar teaching as well as how their beliefs is reflected in their teaching practices in a much more local second language setting. Since teachers play a major role in the delivery of language instruction in classrooms (Moore, 2003), it is important that teachers themselves be aware of the belief system that they are operating from.

This awareness can be developed and examined by starting on the undergraduate or trainee level, where formal grammar instruction and teaching practicum is fairly recent where these trainee teachers can reflect and be aware on their current beliefs system and to whether their teaching practices are worth maintaining, or should it be changed to suit the current practices of grammar. Institutions can benefit from this knowledge, as Farrell (1999) suggested, teacher

education programs can integrate those beliefs and personal understandings of grammar.

Thus, the findings of this study may provide insights into the belief systems of UNIMAS English trainee teachers in order to gain some indication as to whether and to what extent there be awareness on their beliefs of grammar and how these awareness influences their teaching practices of grammar.

1.6 Operational Definition of Terms

1.6.1 Teacher's Belief

Kagan (1992, p. 65) defines teachers' beliefs as "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic materials to be taught." Kagan (1992) also adds that teachers' beliefs are generally stable and do not change. These beliefs can be reflected by the nature of instruction the teacher provides to the students.

On the other hand, Borg (2001, p.186) defines belief as follows:

A belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behaviour.

Sakui & Gaies (1999, p. 474) defines beliefs as the "central constructs in every discipline which deals with human behaviour and learning".

Based on these definitions, teachers' beliefs can described as firmly held assumptions that the teacher holds as true and these beliefs can be reflected in their thought and behaviour and are also reflected in classroom practices.

1.6.2 Grammar

Grammar has been defined in many ways in literature, which makes a single definition hard to pinpoint. Grammar has been described by Joyce & Burns (2001, p. 4) as “essentially about the systems and patterns we use to select and combine words” that is central to “human communication”. Similarly, Thornbury (1999, p. 13) describes grammar as “a description of the rules for forming sentences, including an account of the meanings that these forms convey”. Thornbury (1999) goes on to describe that grammar adds meaning to the language that it enables learners to use language to represent the things happen in the real world and this facilitate interaction with other people.

However, for the purpose of this study, Larsen-Freeman’s (1998, 2003) framework of grammar will be used. Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that these definitions of grammar tend to undermine the broad nature of grammar, therefore proposed a framework of grammar be defined from three domains of syntax structure, semantics and pragmatics of the language. This definition is a thorough and considered a comprehensive framework of grammar since it integrates three domains that have traditionally been kept separate (Nunan, 1999).

Therefore, Larsen-Freeman’s (2003) definition of grammar will be used, in which grammar is the interaction of three domains of language syntax structure rules, semantics and pragmatics.

1.7 Scope of the study

This study is a survey research that only covers the teacher beliefs with regard to grammar teaching and how this is reflected in their lesson plans during their teaching practicum.

It does not cover the observable instructional behaviours that the teachers display during classroom practice. Other variables that are not included in this study are the actual discourse (e.g. explanations, materials) that the teachers use during the classroom practice, which is lacking from just analyzing the discourse analysis of the lesson plans given by the selected participants.

1.8 Chapter Review

This chapter has discussed the setting of the research, along with a brief overview of studies related to the research. The purpose of the study along with the objective is discussed. The chapter goes on to describe the significance of the study. Operational definition of terms are described and finally, descriptions for the scope of the study. On the next chapter, there will be literature reviews on the concepts grammar and of the teaching of grammar, along teachers' beliefs about grammar that can shape the actual classroom practice of teaching grammar.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews the concepts of grammar and grammar teaching, as well as the teaching approaches to grammar. This chapter then goes on to discuss the importance of teaching grammar in English language teaching, in particular the English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. Also, issues of teachers' beliefs in grammar teaching are discussed along with a review of previous related studies.

2.1 Grammar

Cross (1991) defines grammar as the body of rules which underlie a language. These rules govern the structure of words and in turn, govern the structure of clauses and sentences that are acceptable to educated native speakers in order to convey meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Joyce & Burns (2001) on the other hand, describes grammar as essentially the systems and patterns used to select and combine words that are central to human communication. Similarly, Thornbury (1999) describes grammar as a description of the rules that form sentences which includes the meanings that these forms convey.

However, Larsen-Freeman (1998, 2003) argues that these definitions of grammar tend to undermine the broad nature of grammar, therefore proposed a framework of grammar be defined from the three domains of syntax structure,

semantics and pragmatics of the language. Syntax refers to the rules for accepted word formations, while semantic is the cohesion of ideas and finally pragmatic is the study of the use of words conventions that are accepted in different contexts. This framework shows that there is an interaction between the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the language that form the basis of grammar. This definition of grammar is viewed as the most comprehensive conceptualization of grammar (Nunan, 1999) since it integrates three dimensions of grammar that have traditionally been kept separate. For the purpose of this study, therefore grammar is defined as the study of how syntax rules (form), semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (use) work together to enable individuals to communicate through language (Nunan, 1999; Larsen-Freeman, 1998, 2003).

2.1.2 Why is grammar important?

In language teaching, grammar is considered as one of the important and yet remains one of the most complicated domains in teaching and learning (Borg, 2003; Ellis, 1994; Kolln & Hancock, 2005; Mulroy, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). Nunan (1999) describes that is grammar is important arguing that without grammar, a language lacks the conformance to how words should work together in order to create meaning through communication. Swan (2005) adds that even though with the contextual support of vocabulary and sign languages, the result is still a very limited communication system. From this limitation, there arises a language need that calls for a system that can bridge the gap between communicating and meaning, and also functions as a way to express the complex system relationship of meaning and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). As a result, grammar becomes that system that arises from the need of the language, so grammar becomes relevant and important in understanding how the language works.

In English in a Second Language (ESL) setting, and often in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, the teaching of grammar is considered a crucial aspect in teaching. Although there are numerous many disagreements and contradictions in the area of grammar research (Borg, 2003; Larsen-Freeman, 2003), researchers in Second Language and SLA settings such as Krashen (1981, 1984) and Nunan (1998) tend to support that grammar teaching is beneficial in inter-language. According to Higgs and Clifford (1982), language learners especially in second language tend to acquire ungrammatical forms. When this happens, language fossilization occurs to the stages where it is very hard to dislodge. Therefore there is a need to teach grammar in order to prevent fossilization and to correct learners from acquiring ungrammatical forms. Furthermore, grammar teaching and learning is crucial in raising students' language awareness or consciousness of the target language that is necessary for language acquisition (Rutherford and Smith, 1988). However, even though these studies support the importance of grammar teaching, the problem arises when they contradict and does not agree on a single particular approach or research focus. Ellis (1998) mentions that these studies have contradicting outcomes, for example research on explicit grammar rules have resulted in negative results, while on another study, positive results were recorded.

2.2 Teaching Approaches

In the teaching of grammar, there are two approaches that describe how grammar is taught. Those two approaches are termed as the overt and covert approaches to grammar teaching (Harmer, 1997). Overt and covert approaches can be found in three movements of grammar teaching. These movements have been identified by Joyce and Burns (1999) as (1) Traditionalist Grammar era which was subject to controversies, (2) Formal Grammar movement, pioneered by Chomsky's (1957, cited in Andrews et al., 2004; Kolln & Hancock, 2005) works on Syntactic Structures and subsequently on Generative or Transformational Grammar and the (3)